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Freed Chinese dissident to begin life in spotlight

■ **Wei Jingsheng will now add spoken words to the published letters that have been his legacy**

By TED ANTHONY
ASSOCIATED PRESS

Now and then, in two decades' worth of prison letters that ruminated about his nation, its condition and its future, China's best-known dissident would reflect on his own role in all of it.

"I don't think," Wei Jingsheng wrote in 1982, "that all my opinions are necessarily correct, and I certainly don't think I am such a threatening figure."

Now those who have watched Wei for years — from his government to overseas Chinese everywhere — will get a better sense of whether that's true.

Fresh from incarceration, Wei embarks today upon a new phase of his life — his first news conference and his chance to add spoken words and thoughts about his experiences and politics to the published letters that have been his legacy.

"He may well become a strong and forceful voice. Or he may disappear," said Patricia Stranahan, director of the Asian Studies Program at the University of Pittsburgh. "He is quite eloquent. If he is able to maintain that eloquence, he will become an extraordinary force."

The 47-year-old former electrician came to the United States after the Chinese government released him from prison Saturday and put him on a plane to Detroit. He spent the week hospitalized there, undergoing treatment for hypertension and other ailments that worsened during his time in prison. He arrived in New York last night.

"A lot of people say that this is a low tide for Chinese democracy, but it does not look like that now," Wei, speaking Chinese to about 200 people who welcomed him at La Guardia Airport. "The low tide," he said, "is the start for the high tide."

Wei, in his younger years a staunch supporter of the Chinese government, had been imprisoned since 1979 for "counter-revolutionary activities," including his outspokenness during Beijing's "Democracy Wall" movement of that year. He was released briefly in 1993 — a move widely perceived as an attempt to win Beijing the 2000 Olympics — but was arrested and imprisoned again a short time later.

This latest release came two weeks after Chinese President Jiang Zemin's visit to the United States — a visit that included talks with President Clinton, who raised the issue of China's human rights policies, which many in Congress denounce as repressive.

A collection of Wei's letters "The Courage to Stand Alone," was published in May. The letters — some to his family, others to Chinese leaders, many quite audacious — documented prison life and outlined his criticisms against the government. But in them, he always reiterated his love for China.

"When you read Wei's words, it's really not like reading anything else you've ever read from a Chinese writer. And I can only believe that having the physical person there saying these words out loud is going to have a galvanizing effect," said Wendy Wolf, who edited Wei's letters for Viking Penguin and finally got the chance to meet him last night.

"Like the book, seeing him speak in person will help us humanize someone whose name is basically on a roster," Wolf said.

Writers and activists around the world had long pressed for Wei's release, with playwright Arthur Miller earlier this year calling him "a new hero ... in these most unheroic of times." And those who greeted him at La Guardia airport with banners reading "Warmly Welcome" and "Free Political Prisoners" expressed optimism that Wei would remain an activist.

"We hope he will settle here. We hope he will mobilize all of the groups because he has the ability to organize us," said one supporter, Mike Gao.

Uncounted numbers of dissidents remain imprisoned or restricted in China.

ASSOCIATED PRESS
Chinese dissident Wei Jinghseng waves to admirers upon his arrival at LaGuardia Airport in Queens.

John Kamm, an independent American businessman who has established a dialogue with the Chinese government about political prisoners, said Wei's release "means virtually anybody can be released given the right internal and external factors.

"Wei is a phenomenon. He broke the mold. Chinese history is full of examples of scholar-officials who have dissented. But this is a Red Guard, an electrician, an anomaly — a worker who was an intellectual," Kamm said.

"Now this is a step for him into the unknown — speaking to an international audience. And certainly his words will find their way back to China. It's a big moment for him. But where will it all lead? I can't even imagine."

Experts say food relief effort making its mark in N. Korea

ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — A team of American relief experts back from a three-month monitoring trip to North Korea said international aid is making the difference between hunger and starvation in the country.

They also said they saw no sign that food shipments from the United States, China and other countries had been diverted to the military and no indication of discontent among the population because of food shortages.

"They have faith they will overcome "because they've done it before," Michael Frank, a Catholic Relief Services official who led the five-person team to 10 of the country's 12 provinces, said yesterday.

Besides Catholic Relief Services, the consortium of nongovernment agencies involved included Mercy Corps International, Amigos Internacionales, CARE and World Vision. The group monitored distribution of 60,500 tons of cereals from the U.S. Agency for International Development.

North Korea sought international help after floods late last year severely reduced its harvest of cereals, mainly rice. This year's harvest improved, but Frank said North Korea would still need food aid in 1998.

"In spite of the challenges of restricted access, language and cultural barriers, the team came away with the strong conviction that there is an enormous need" for additional food shipments, Frank said.

He said the team saw high levels of malnutrition and talked with people who took extreme measures to survive, such as picking up grains of rice in a field after completion of harvesting.

Dr. John LaNoue of Amigos Internacionales said the monitors experienced some difficulties in obtaining answers to their 100-question survey because in a communist state statistics are treated as state secrets.

He said North Koreans also were trained from childhood to be suspicious of Americans "and their image of us is a one-eyed person behind a rifle sight in the DMZ with barbed wire."

Frank said the team hopes to return to North Korea next March and develop a program to feed children in schools.

He said aid groups from Britain, Germany, Ireland and other countries were operating relief programs in North Korea, which formerly was closed to foreigners.

Health & Fitness
Check the Advance Health and Fitness pages on Mondays.

ELSEWHERE ... in the world

Journalist slain

BOGOTA, Colombia — Two gunmen on a motorcycle killed a magazine editor yesterday in the regional capital of Armenia, authorities said, bringing to seven the number of Colombian journalists murdered this year.

Jairo Elias Marquez, editor in chief of the monthly news magazine El Marques, was about to get into his car when he was gunned down in the city 120 miles west of Bogota.

An Armenia police spokesman told local reporters that Marquez, 40, had received telephoned death threats but that it was not clear from whom.

Marquez's magazine had backed Henry Gomez Tabares, who on Oct. 26 was elected governor of Quindio state, in the heart of Colombia's coffee region.

Firefighters killed

ELSTERWERDA, Germany — A freight train pulling tanker cars full of gasoline and heating oil derailed and exploded in an east German station today. Two firefighters died fighting the blaze.

The blast set afire two tanker cars, and flames spread to the roof over the tracks at Elsterwerda, 70 miles south of Berlin.

A wall at the burning station later collapsed, killing a firefighter.

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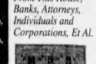

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To Benefit Friends of Karen

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